Working Together to Cleanup a Historic Region

PCBs leaking from the plant site became a new source of PCBs to the river

Hudson River PCBs

The Hudson River—stretching 315 miles from is source in the Adirondack mountains to its mouth at the southern tip of New York City—has long been considered one of our nation's most polluted waterways. Now, after years of contention, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), General Electric (GE), local communities, and other government and state organizations are working together to develop a clean up plan that will help revitalize the river and region that have a historical significance dating back to the revolutionary war.

Hudson River PCBs Site

During a 30-year period ending in 1977, between 209,000 and 1.3 million pounds of PCBs were released into the Hudson River from two GE capacitor manufacturing plants located in Fort Edward and Hudson Falls, New York. PCB oils were released both directly and indirectly from these plants. Once released, the PCBs attached to river sediment and accumulated downstream as they settled in the river. Historic fish and sediment data suggest PCBs were accumulating downstream of the old Fort Edward Dam as well as gathering behind the dam. The removal of the dam in 1973 spread the accumulated PCBs downstream as far south as the New York City Harbor.

EPA classifies PCBs as probable human carcinogens, and these chemicals are also linked to other serious non-cancer adverse health effects including reduced ability to fight infections, low birth weights, and learning problems. PCBs, once released into the environment accumulate in animals and work their way up the food chain to humans, a term called bio-accumulation. Many minority and low-income residents along the river rely on river fishing to supplement their daily diet, and the river was once home to a large commercial striped bass fishing industry. In 1976, because of the concern over the bio-accumulation of PCBs in fish and other aquatic organisms and their consumption by people, the State of New York banned fishing in the Upper Hudson River and commercial fishing of striped bass, as well as several other species in the Lower Hudson. In 1984, a 200-mile stretch of the Hudson River from Hudson Falls to the Battery in New York City was classified as a Superfund site.

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JUST THE FACTS:

- The total cost of Superfund cleanup, including GE's contribution, is projected to be $500 million.
- GE has agreed to conduct the initial sampling and mapping of the river that includes collecting approximately 30,000 sediment samples, and has agreed to reimburse EPA for $5 million of the Agency's past costs and up to $2.62 million of future costs that will be incurred by EPA in overseeing GE's sampling work.
- EPA has established a local field office in Ft. Edward, the heart of the most active community involvement to date.

"GE's commitment to take on this stage of the work while we continue to discuss other aspects of the project is another positive sign that we have entered a new chapter in the Hudson River cleanup. GE is making a substantial initial investment in the recovery of the Hudson River"

Jane Kenny
EPA Region 2 Administrator

Working with GE to Clean up the River

In February 2002, EPA signed a Record of Decision (ROD) to conduct the long-term cleanup of a 40-mile portion of the site in the upper Hudson. The decision calls for dredging 2.65 million cubic yards of contaminated sediment to remove an estimated 150,000 pounds of PCBs at an estimated cost of $500 million. As part of this cleanup decision, EPA has committed to conducting rigorous and meaningful community involvement during the design and implementation of the Hudson River PCBs dredging project. "We are committing to an open process that will give affected communities and interested parties the chance to comment on critical issues, such as facility siting and the development of performance standards" said Jane Kenny, who heads EPA's Regional office responsible for carrying out the cleanup plan.

Before dredging can begin, EPA must prepare a design for the cleanup. This design phase, which will include developing performance standards, further characterizing the contamination, and the siting of dewatering facilities is expected to take about three years. On July 23, 2002, after years of contention, EPA and GE began a new chapter in the cleanup by signing an Administrative Order on Consent (AOC) agreeing to start the sampling and mapping of the river. The work will include collecting approximately 30,000 sediment samples to determine the exact location and extent of the contamination, and mapping sections of the river using side-scan sonar and other approaches to help determine the best approach for conducting the dredging. GE also agreed to pay $5 million to EPA in partial reimbursement of the Agency's past costs and to reimburse up to $2.62 million of future costs that will be incurred by EPA in overseeing GE's sampling work. "GE's commitment to take on this stage of the work while we continue to discuss other aspects of the project is another positive sign that we have entered a new chapter in the Hudson River cleanup. GE is making a substantial initial investment in the recovery of the Hudson River" said Regional Administrator Jane Kenny. In a separate agreement with the State of New York, GE is implementing source control remedies at both the Hudson Falls and Ft. Edward plants that will prevent additional PCBs from entering the river.

CONTACTS:

David Kluesner, EPA Region 2, Community Involvement Coordinator (CIC) (212) 637-3653 or join the Hudson River listserv by visiting the EPA Region 2 web site at:

http://www.epa.gov/hudson
and then clicking on Hudson River Listserv in the box titled “stay informed”

Addressing the Public's Concerns

EPA is committed to a rigorous and meaningful community involvement program and has already begun to carefully consider many of the issues raised by some members of the public about the potential negative effects of dredging. Some of these concerns were addressed in the remedy selected in February, including the commitment to remove contaminated waste via rail and/or barge (thereby reducing the amount of truck traffic through the community), and the decision to treat and dispose of PCB contaminated material in a permitted facility outside of the Hudson River valley. In addition, EPA has established a field office in Fort Edward, the heart of the most active community involvement to date, and has also assigned two Community Involvement Coordinators and a Field Office Director to support the project. This level of support is unprecedented in the Superfund program.

Catch and Release fishing is the rule on much of the upper Hudson because of PCB contamination

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EPA also contracted with a team of experienced public participation professionals to identify the best ways to meaningfully involve the community during all phases of the project. This team interviewed more than 150 stakeholders throughout the 200 mile stretch of river and held two public workshops to gain an understanding of community issues and concerns, and to identify important considerations for developing effective public information and a rigorous and meaningful public participation program. EPA will soon release a draft Community Involvement Plan with their recommended approach for ensuring an effective plan for community involvement. EPA is continuing to form partnerships with the community and GE in their effort to cleanup this historic and majestic river.